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ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL
Substantive session of 1995
Item 9 of the provisional
agenda**
COORDINATION QUESTIONS

Communication for development programmes in the United Nations system

Note by the Secretary-General

Addendum

The Secretary-General has the honour to submit to the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council the comments of the Administrative Committee on Coordination on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Communication for development programmes in the United Nations system" (A/50/126-E/1995/20, annex).

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ANNEX

Comments of the Administrative Committee on Coordination on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Communication for development programmes in the United Nations system"

I. GENERAL COMMENTS

1. The purpose of the report prepared by the Joint Inspection Unit on the initiative of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is to study the role of the discipline of communication in the successful implementation of development programmes and in the improvement of the interaction between actors in development, namely, the organizations and agencies of the United Nations system, Governments, non-governmental organizations and beneficiaries. As stressed by the Inspector, the report (a) attempted to define the notion of communication for development and its dimension as an instrument for rallying communities to participate in development projects from assessed needs to implementation, monitoring and evaluation; (b) looked into the communication programmes of UNESCO, which is a focal point for this area within the United Nations system, and examined the status of similar programmes of other agencies; (c) reviewed the existing informal arrangements for coordinating communication programmes for development in the system and examined the opportunities for setting up a more appropriate mechanism for enhancing cooperation among agencies; (d) considered ways to strengthen communication in humanitarian assistance activities and peace-keeping operations; and (e) explored the possibility of cost-saving aspects by using existing forums and facilities in the area under consideration.

2. Based upon information received by the Inspector during his contacts with the staff of headquarters and field offices, and from the analysis of replies to questionnaires provided by 15 organizations and agencies, the author of the study comes to the conclusion that the situation regarding communication activities in the United Nations system is not satisfactory, nor is the level of inter-agency coordination keeping up with the evolution of the discipline. He concludes that most of the agencies attach insufficient importance to communication in operational activities. Left to the initiative of the Chief Technical Adviser of the project, communication is rarely integrated into the entire cycle of development assistance. In the view of the Inspector, the mass media have not been made sufficiently aware of the extensive activities of the system in the field of development, the implementation of projects and their impact on the quality of life of recipients. The Inspector makes a number of recommendations aimed at raising awareness and concern among the United Nations agencies and organizations, multilateral agencies, academic circles and non-governmental organizations as to the need for effective communication structures for attaining the desired objectives of development and humanitarian assistance programmes.

3. The Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) found the topic of the study of great interest to the whole family of organizations, agencies, funds and bodies of the United Nations system. It appreciated the attempts of the Inspector to draw attention to the role of development communication as a vital

component in the development planning process that has to be integrated into any development strategy, especially by the field agencies of the system.

4. In general, members of ACC have found the report well-conceived, comprehensive and balanced. They support in principle its conclusions and recommendations, which are generally fair and constructive, and consider appropriate the proposed measures for improving the situation in the area of communication for development programmes. With regard to the emphasis of the report on the importance of institutional and structural measures for the purpose of improving the efficiency of communication systems, to meet the ever-increasing challenges in the field of development, in general, and in humanitarian assistance and in connection with peace-keeping operations, in particular, some members of the Committee consider it worthy of note that the integration of communication into global development efforts implies the idea that substantive information should be included in major projects and programmes. Accurate and objective information addressing the development problems of the contemporary world is of great significance for Governments not only to acquire new knowledge and analyse all options for future decisions and actions, but also to provide social mobilization of their activities.

5. ACC supports the Inspector when he singles out UNESCO as the lead agency with a mandate in the sector under consideration, and proposes the strengthening of its International Programme for the Development of Communication. It also appreciates the efforts of the author to touch upon an untapped area, namely, the area of education and communication support for humanitarian assistance and peace-keeping operations.

6. In the view of ACC, the report has made an interesting contribution to the debate in the United Nations system on this matter and on related issues. However, the value of the analysis and recommendations of the study is diminished by some of its assumptions and judgements, which are not substantiated and cannot be fully supported.

7. Thus, several members of ACC point to the lack of a clear and common definition of the concept of communication for development in the report, which is one of the reasons behind a poor understanding of inter-agency cooperation in this field. They believe that a common understanding of the concept and related goals, processes and technologies should be shared among all concerned United Nations agencies, organizations and programmes, with the hope that that common understanding would facilitate inter-agency cooperation and maximize the impact of their development programmes at all levels.

8. One member of ACC perceives a sort of contradiction between the terms of reference of the report and its attendant recommendations. In its view, the study appears to ignore the role of the technical media that could be used for inter-agency and public communication. Having a great potential in inter-agency communication, new information technologies such as e-mail, bulletin boards, gopher or world-wide web and other internet tools are very efficient in reaching such external target groups as academic and student circles world wide. It might, therefore, have been useful if the report had incorporated a separate section on the impact of new technologies on communication, with appropriate recommendations on how to handle it in United Nations communications.

9. Another organization believes that the question of dissemination of information about the United Nations system's activities needs greater emphasis in the report. It stresses that the United Nations, in the eyes of the media and of the public, is more known for its peace-keeping and "trouble-shooting" activities than for its very important peace-building function, carried out through multifarious development activities, and that this distorted view needs to be corrected.

10. There is no agreement among the members of ACC concerning the proposal of the Inspector on the strengthening of coordination of communication at the country level. In particular, they do not see the justification for the United Nations to get into the field of creating a body for communication for development and humanitarian assistance at the country level, while there exist infrastructures such as those of the resident coordinator and the Joint United Nations Information Committee for that purpose, as correctly mentioned in the report by the author himself.

11. A number of members of the Committee expressed their concern that their agencies' views on the subject of the study, as well as their experience in the area of communication for development programmes, either did not find proper reflection, or were not included in the report, in spite of the fact that the Inspector had been in contact with those agencies or appropriate information had been provided to the Joint Inspection Unit at the preliminary stage of the preparation of the study.

II. COMMENTS ON RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1. Policy decisions and provision of resources for communication

In recognition of the fact that communication is a prerequisite for any programme of the United Nations system to succeed:

(a) The policy of communication should be integrated within each department of an agency dealing with development and humanitarian assistance;

(b) The budgets of all the projects and programmes should contain a specific provision for communication activities.

12. As has been mentioned in the general comments made above, members of ACC are in full agreement with the Inspector that the policy of communication should be integrated within the activities of agencies dealing with development and humanitarian assistance, and that specific provision for communication activities should be included in the budgets of all development projects and programmes. Most development agencies state that their approach in this area is in line with the above recommendation. One organization, however, feels with regard to this recommendation that it would have been helpful if statistical data or case-studies had complemented the assertion that "communication is a prerequisite for any programme of the United Nations system to succeed".

Recommendation 2. Location of communication units

> The major role of communication in the United Nations system is to help programme managers to make their work understood primarily within their own organization, secondly among the sister agencies and most important of all by the beneficiaries. The task of information divisions is to disseminate information about the activities of the United Nations organizations. There is thus a clear distinction between the two disciplines. The present situation whereby communication units are located within the Information Division, with the exception of UNICEF, where the Programme Communication and Social Mobilization Unit is located within the Programme Division rather than the Information Division, diminishes the importance of communication, which is not exclusively public information. Communication units, therefore, should enjoy a certain autonomy and have direct functional relations with the various organizational offices dealing with field activities.

13. Members of ACC note that this recommendation clearly makes a distinction between communication and information. There are different views among the agencies and organizations with regard to the location of communication units within respective secretariats. Some members of the Committee believe that, in view of the increasing demand of Member States for better accountability, transparency and careful use of financial resources, the suggestion to locate communication units within programme divisions, as well as the proposal on the setting-up of such units within the policy-making divisions of agencies (see recommendation 4 (a)), can provide further impetus for the creation of a more appropriate mechanism for the improvement of information and communication systems. At the same time they caution that the above arrangements will not necessarily guarantee the rational use of resources and prevent the eventual proliferation of subsidiary bodies or the duplication of efforts. Other members of the Committee, while supporting in principle the Inspector's idea of a certain autonomy of these units, feel, however, that it should be left up to each agency or office as to whether or not to keep the unit within an information division. Nevertheless, all members of ACC are united in the view that, in either case, both information and communication units should work hand in hand, as they are affected by each other.

14. One member of the Committee would like to see the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) mentioned among the organizations where the communication unit is an autonomous one, in that the Education, Communication and Youth Branch of its secretariat is an integral part of the Technical and Evaluation Division and is clearly differentiated from the Information and External Relations Division.

Recommendation 3. Resources

Donor agencies should be invited to provide adequate resources to support and expand communication activities, in particular for participatory development initiatives.

15. ACC supports this recommendation in principle.

Recommendation 4. Coordination

In order to improve coordination in the area of communication by the organizations of the United Nations system, in particular those involved with development, action has to be taken on two levels, headquarters and country:

(a) Headquarters: An internal mechanism such as focal points should be established whereby departments would inform each other about the work done on communication in their respective units. In addition, since communication is a management process, it has to be part of all undertakings. There should be a unit within the policy-making division of agencies that would assume the responsibility of coordinating communication activities. The same unit should be the link at the inter-agency level;

(b) Country level: Coordination at the country level should be practical and flexible in order to respond to "on-the-spot" situations. Greater coordination at the country level should be sought by using fully the team of agency representatives within the resident coordinator system. For this purpose and in cooperation with Governments and other concerned parties, a communication coordinating committee could be established, including the chief technical adviser of the project, representatives from Governments, bilateral donors, non-governmental organizations and community leaders. It could be entrusted with the task of formulating communication policies, following up the implementation of these policies and preparing a joint report on the contribution of communication to the success of the project.

16. Most members of ACC agree with the Inspector's proposal that, in order to strengthen inter-agency coordination in the area of communication, all the agencies and organizations of the United Nations system should identify focal points at their respective headquarters for the purpose of facilitating intra-institutional dialogue and exchanging information. Some agencies, while agreeing in particular with the provisions of subparagraph (a) that communication and coordination should be ingrained in everyday work, as it is the main ingredient to smooth operations, caution the approach of establishing separate operational units for that purpose. Their argument is based on the belief that, in some cases, allocating the responsibility for development communication to a specific organizational unit or focal point may lead other

units to believe that the matter falls outside their responsibility, and thus the intended integration of communication into all undertakings may not be achieved. This observation, however, in the view of those agencies, should not refer to specific information programmes that create and maintain information networks. For further views concerning recommendation 4 (a), see the comments related to recommendation 2 above.

17. With regard to subparagraph (b), members of the Committee have different views in connection with coordination at the country level. Some agencies fully endorse the need for a country mechanism such as a communication coordinating committee, whose task, in their view, should be to formulate not only communication policies, but also communication strategies. Others, as mentioned in paragraph 10 above, oppose the idea of the establishment of additional international bureaucratic mechanisms, taking into account the existence of such infrastructures as the resident coordinator and the Joint United Nations Information Committee, which can successfully carry out the coordinating functions at the country level.

Recommendation 5. Cooperation with non-governmental organizations

> Communication at the field level involving popular participation of beneficiaries via local and international non-governmental organizations is one of the ways of ensuring the effectiveness of technical cooperation. The United Nations system should work more closely with development-oriented non-governmental organizations at the grass-roots level that have already proved to have sound communication channels with the beneficiaries.

18. ACC supports the proposal of the Inspector concerning closer work with development-oriented non-governmental organizations at the grass-roots level. These should be viewed as including workers' and employers' organizations. A number of members of the Committee note that they are already well under way with the implementation of the recommendation. In particular, to further enhance communication with the beneficiaries and thereby increase the effectiveness of technical cooperation activities, these organizations and agencies have been strengthening their cooperation with development-oriented non-governmental organizations in such areas as economic and social development, poverty alleviation, environment and sustainable development, integrated rural development and so on. They also stress that this recommendation should be read in conjunction with some proposals contained in the earlier report of the Joint Inspection Unit on the subject of cooperation with non-governmental organizations (A/49/122-E/1994/44, annex). One organization expressed its concern that the activities of the United Nations information centres and services had not been taken into account in connection with recommendation 5.

Recommendation 6. Round-table conference

At present, there is no regular forum whereby discussions are held and views exchanged on development and humanitarian assistance communication programmes. This has resulted in the evolution of an informal round-table conference for development communication. Consecutive round-table meetings have demonstrated a considerable amount of goodwill for practical cooperation.

The commitment and productivity of the experts' participation in the round tables have proved that times are ripe for a better organized system of coordination in order to cross agency boundaries, which have been recognized as barriers. To achieve this objective, the existing informal round-table process should be regularized. It should include all United Nations agencies and the regional economic commissions of the United Nations and take into account the mandate of UNESCO on communication.

19. Members of ACC consider this recommendation to be of great importance. However, some agencies believe that, while the idea to regularize the present informal round tables and extend them to all United Nations agencies, including the regional commissions, deserves to be supported, it is important to separate the purposes of exchanging views on communication and development, on one hand, and coordinating and maximizing the efficiency of communication programmes in the United Nations system, on the other. They note that an informal round table that includes representatives of all agencies, as well as members of the academic community and relevant non-governmental organizations, is useful for the purposes of developing innovative ideas and concepts relating to how development communication should be understood, as far as this concept has not yet been defined according to one universal standard. This body could also define ways to measure and evaluate the success of communication programmes; establish criteria to differentiate between communication structures and communication outcome; provide expertise not only on how communication efforts affect development outcomes, but also on the degree to which those outcomes are equitably achieved among nations and peoples of the world (also known as "information gaps" or "knowledge gaps"). In brief, it is the view of some members of the Committee that the informal round tables should remain a body that directs the conceptual areas of development communication, while the coordinating functions should be executed by a different body representing mostly the agencies and organizations of the United Nations system. One organization asserted that this recommendation was unfortunately silent on existing mechanisms for inter-agency meetings on public information issues covering high-priority agenda items such as social and economic development, crime prevention and criminal justice, human rights, environment and sustainable development, women and development, population and refugees. Some members propose to include among the regular participants of the informal round-table process bilateral agencies, universities, non-governmental organizations active in the field of development communication, women, development planners and others. One agency believes that the round-table conferences on communication

and development should be organized exclusively in developing countries in order to be in tune with local conditions.

Recommendation 7. International Programme for the Development of Communication

The Inspector believes that in order to avoid duplication and promote a better use of resources, the Intergovernmental Council of the International Programme for the Development of Communication should look into the mandate of the Programme in order to enable it to respond more effectively to the needs of developing countries in the field of infrastructure-building and mass-media training. In the process of introducing possible changes, the following points, among others, should be taken into account:

(a) Improve the dissemination of information of the International Programme for the Development of Communication programmes to agencies through more effective means of communication;

(b) Ensure that development communication and training programmes attract more contributions from United Nations agencies, bilateral and multilateral organizations, non-governmental organizations, foundations and universities, in addition to the fund-raising efforts of the Programme.

20. ACC supports, in principle, the proposals of this recommendation related to the activities of the International Programme for the Development of Communication. The agencies recognize that the biennial work programme of UNESCO clearly spells out the assistance to member States through Programme and training activities. Working with national institutions for information and education, as well as within its national commissions, UNESCO responds effectively to the needs of developing countries mentioned in the above recommendation. At the same time, they note that it is not so much the mandate of the International Programme for the Development of Communication that is in question, given that the Programme, since its inception in 1980, has responded comprehensively to the call from developing countries for assistance in the development of their communication infrastructure. The points that are really at issue are, firstly, dissemination of information on projects of the Programme, and, secondly, a more concerted effort to diversify sources of assistance both in cash and in kind. These two points could be remedied by reinforcement of funds for information and diversified fund raising.

Recommendation 8. Training

(a) Owing to the fact that there is a lack of trained communication experts globally and in particular in developing countries, the organizations of the United Nations system should develop a systematic approach to training. Such training should benefit field workers/development agents and technicians, as well as communication planners and specialists at higher levels;

(b) Academic institutions in developing and developed countries should be encouraged to include curricula for development communication;

(c) With the aim of cost saving, the use of existing infrastructures and facilities of the United Nations system, namely, the ILO International Training Centre at Turin, should be considered by the appropriate ACC subsidiary body;

(d) The fund for financing these training programmes should be envisaged within the communication component budget and be allocated at the inception of projects.

21. Members of ACC are in full agreement with the provisions of this recommendation, including the proposal to use more effectively for training in the field of communication development the existing infrastructures and facilities of the United Nations system, in particular the ILO International Training Centre at Turin. One organization asserted that the activities of the Department of Public Information of the Secretariat, in particular its annual training programme for young broadcasters from developing countries, should have been mentioned in connection with this recommendation.

Recommendation 9. ACC classification

Because of the constant evolution in the field of communication and its strategic value in disseminating information and sharing knowledge, the ACC programme classification on communication extended for UNDP use should be redefined to respond to needs of the Member States. For this, in addition to the class entries proposed by UNESCO, FAO and UNFPA should also be consulted in order to ensure an integrated and harmonized set of categories.

22. Members of ACC welcome the proposal to extend and redefine the Committee's classification on communication, and express their readiness, in collaboration with UNESCO, FAO and UNFPA, to propose new entries to be considered by the appropriate ACC subsidiary body.

Recommendation 10. Peace-keeping operations

The United Nations has no specific structure in place for immediate action to deal with communication when a peace-keeping operation emerges. The Inspector, based on past experience, is convinced that it is imperative for the United Nations to have a stand-by unit equipped with a group of communication experts, which would be entrusted with the task of operating in the field from the beginning of the operation to cover the entire spectrum of communication/information requirements until the end of the operation. The unit would be mobile and report directly to the head of the Department of Peace-keeping Operations. It should be established within the existing resources of the Department and work very closely with the Department of Public Information, benefiting from its existing decentralized structure, representatives of agencies and other media forums to improve coordination among the parties acting at the field level. Depending on the nature of the peace-keeping operation, specialized agencies, UNESCO in particular because of its specific mandate, and non-governmental organizations should also be on call for the Secretary-General and ready to put at the disposal of the United Nations their expertise in this field.

23. Members of ACC support this recommendation and assert that some of its provisions are already being implemented. The agencies underline that they stand ready to assist the Secretary-General to support peace-keeping operations within their respective mandates. Some members of the Committee note that they have special units that are already engaged in humanitarian assistance, peace-keeping and peacemaking operations, as in Haiti, Rwanda, Somalia, the former Yugoslavia, the former republics of the Soviet Union, Cambodia and other parts of the world. Some members of the Committee appreciate the proposal of the Inspector concerning the conceptualization of the communication component of peace-keeping operations and humanitarian assistance (see para. 43 of his report) as completely different, though complementary, to that of public information.